DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 867 CS 216 386

AUTHOR Sohn, Katherine K.
TITLE Gettin' Above Their Raisin's: Content Analysis of Literacy Narratives.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Autobiographies; *Class Activities; Content Analysis; Cultural Literacy; Diversity (Student); *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Journal Writing; *Student Journals; Student Reaction; *Writing Assignments
IDENTIFIERS Appalachia; *Personal Writing; Writing Prompts

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the content analysis of literacy narratives written in a college composition course in the Fall, 1996. The students developed their histories during the first weeks of class, using a journal format and sharing results with the class. They then wrote a polished and completed reading and writing autobiography. Using purposive sampling, 24 narratives from 40 collected were chosen to represent six confident and six tentative males and females. Narratives fell into three main thematic categories: the influences of family, pre- and public school, and religion. One discovery was that tentative students had parents who modeled literacy adequately. Another discovery was the pivotal literacy role of grandparents. The centrality of the Bible was a third discovery. In the confident group, about 60% of parents of both males and females had finished high school and about a third finished college. In terms of reading material, more females than males listed the books they have collected. Females kept journals; males did not. Despite their rich literacy histories, these students, especially the tentatives, were concerned with how they would manage college work. Instructors can use literacy narratives to help their students situate themselves in college, the community from which they come, and can look at solutions to problems that emerge from such a study. (Contains 19 references; appendixes contain autobiography prompts and results of the content analysis.) (NKA)

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ED 420 867

Gettin' Above Their Raisin's: Content Analysis of Literacy Narratives

Katherine K. Sohn

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Gettin' Above their Raisin's:

Content Analysis of Literacy Narratives

Purpose

Nothing that I have done in the 14 years I have been teaching has touched me more than reading the literacy narratives my college composition students wrote for me in Fall, 1996. Looking at them for the first time was instructive; reading and analyzing them for content was illuminating. Today, as a teacher/researcher, I want to share with you some amazing findings from this study. For those who have not done this kind of activity, I hope to convince you of its usefulness on any educational level.

Teachers As Researchers

Thinking of myself as a researcher in my own classroom was difficult: I am extremely task oriented—syllabus to cover, papers to grade. Two events which changed my orientation toward classroom research occurred when I enrolled in the IUP doctoral program in July, 1996: Writing my own reading and writing histories and reading Reclaiming the classroom: Teacher research as an agency for change, edited by Goswami and Stillman (1987).

When I returned to teaching in the fall of 1996, I was so excited about what I had learned from doing my literacy history, that I asked my students to share their own. Using questions such as "What sort of reading/writing does your family do?" "Who are the significant people who influenced your reading/writing, good or bad?" (see Appendix A--Reading and Writing Autobiography prompts handout), I guided students through the

development of their narratives. These questions combined those from my graduate programs and from Nancie Atwell's (1987) reading survey from In the Middle. The students and I worked the first four weeks of the semester to develop their history, using a journal format and sharing results with the class. The final step was to write a polished and completed reading and writing autobiography, a literacy narrative. When I returned them, we shared their favorite parts with the whole class, and I read some gems that I have unearthed. My students responded positively to this activity. Together we look at the nature of literacy, their roles as writers in an academic context, and begin to look at blending their words with those of the academy.

Benefits For Teachers

From the time I became acquainted with alternative literacies in the works of Heath (1983), Scribner & Cole (1981), Scollon & Scollon (1981), I have tried to recognize those in my students' experience. But I had no idea how rich and varied those literacies were until I read these reading and writing autobiographies. No other writing assignment can come close to revealing the diversity of cultural literacy within one classroom. No other writing assignment can indicate contrastive rhetorical styles. With no other assignment can teachers learn or discover as much about their students. That knowledge is a powerful tool for teachers to use to build up their confidence in academic writing, to affirm their voices, encourage confidence, and improve self-esteem so that students can begin to recognize the power of writing in their lives. I wouldn't have found any of this out had I not been a teacher researcher.

Methodology

Studying genres as subjective as narratives calls for a research methodology that responds to the content of what these writers are saying and proposes how knowledge of that content can help the composition instructor. Naturalistic inquiry provides that tool. Using purposive sampling, I chose twenty-four narratives from forty collected in the 1996-7 academic year to represent six confident and tentative males and females. Confident and tentative are terms which Thomas Newkirk (1995) designated to describe the students in his study of writing conferences at the University of New Hampshire. For purposes of this study, confident designates confidence in writing, ability to handle assignments, and success in grades; tentative indicates an uncertain approach to writing, discomfort with writing assignments, and generally lower grades.

The literacy narratives of my students elicited themes that fell into three main categories: the influences of family, pre- and public school, and religion.

Assumptions And Discoveries

Below are the discoveries I made based on content analysis in those categories.

1. One of the joys of teacher research is gathering data that debunks your own assumptions. I had assumed (based on class performance) that families of tentative students did not model literacy adequately. In fact, I discovered that they have literate parents who manage quite well in their lives. Rachel says, "My parents made sure I read at least one book a day aloud to them. I was constantly reading to improve my comprehension" (Fall, 1996). Although they might not have been successful in school, these families were not illiterate. Frank remarks that, "my father is a very confident man even though he dropped out of school in the eighth grade. He has always expressed to me how important it is to learn how to read and write to the best of my ability. Dad has had

to do everything the hard way and doesn't want me to have to" (Fall 1996). In fact, their parents behaved in similar ways to parents of more confident writers.

2. Obviously, I was not surprised that confident students had a more valuable, more favorable school experiences than did the tentative ones. With more educated parents, more reading material at home, they grew up learning the literacy that schools capitalize on. Both profiles, however, indicted inadequate school practices.

3. Another discovery I made was the pivotal literacy role of their grandparents. Linda describes a common scene:

> I picture in my mind my papaw having a newspaper stretched open widely in front of him, his pipe pressed in his lips as he read. When Papaw was no longer able to sit up and read . . . Mamaw would sit beside him and read the Floyd County Times to him. This and many other images taught me about the importance of reading and writing. (Spring 1997)

I knew that many students lived with or close to their grandparents, but my prejudice again was that it was a poor environment for acquiring reading and writing, especially since I knew the schooling of that generation was minimal. Teachers can always learn!

4. My third discovery focused on the centrality of the Bible. Although I knew how religious Appalachians are in general, until this study, I had not realized the extent of home Bible study. Reading for spiritual interpretation calls for analysis of text which most of their parents and grandparents did on a regular basis. Gary explains:

> To be able to read the Holy Bible and other materials enhances the enjoyment and knowledge of the church's function in our lives. If a person could not read the Bible, it would mean that he or she would have to rely on how others interpreted the words. My church encourages its members to read the Bible, but does not have a lot of Bible study groups [at church] that could involve its members in reading and writing. (Fall, 1996)

Gary relates a literacy focus that has been around for many years in many cultures.

Writing about present day religion in Appalachia, Loyal Jones says that whether or not people attend church regularly, "we are religious in the sense that most of our values and the meaning we find in life spring from the Bible. To understand mountaineers, one must understand our religion" (Jones 1986, p. 39). The Bible shows "[us] clearly what we should be and what we should do"(p. 46). My students' exposure to this kind of modeling boded well for their faith and their writing.

Yet, for all their positive traits, their education does not generally prepare them for college work. Jay concurs: "I wrote poems in literature, reports for history, and took down notes just about everyday. This really didn't prepare me for college. I have had to write many papers in my English class that were nothing like the ones in high school" (Fall, 1996). The narrative introduces them to those demands, makes them more aware of their own literacies, and makes them more confident. Below is the content analysis.

Quotes from students' texts have been regularized to Standard American English. (See Appendix B for the chart summarizing the findings of the content analysis.)

Tentative Students

Looking specifically at narratives of those who did not do well in composition, I notice that males tended to dwell on the handout's general questions that asked them to imagine a world without reading and writing rather than writing about their own experience in those areas. Billy illustrates: "Reading and writing is a basic need for everyday life. We need to learn how to read so that we can understand the symbols of our language. We need writing to express our thoughts to others" (Fall, 1996). Another general response suggested an innovative consideration of life without literacy:

> Imagining a world where reading and writing did not exist would be difficult . . . . Human society as a whole would never learn from their mistakes and would be left stupid. This in fact would lead to a world that would be a government's dream come true, a world that could be manipulated into believing anything they said. (Fall, 1996)

Two of six males were read to and encouraged to read. They grew up with parents who read newspapers and the Bible and wrote letters, grocery lists, and work orders in their jobs.

Eighty-three percent of their fathers dropped out of high school while only seventeen percent of their mothers did so. Frank tells us about a rare case: "My mother graduated from college and has more of an education than any other person in . . .[the] family . . . . My father is a very confident man even though he dropped out of school in the eighth grade" (Fall, 1996). Their parents' purposes of literacy were to communicate by letter with family, to keep up with the news, and to assist them at their workplaces. One writer elaborates: "My grandpa always writes down NASCAR qualifying scores, and he occasionally records movies that he has copied in a book. Every year at Christmas, he writes a grocery list for my mom to pick up ingredients that he needs in order to fix dinner on Christmas Eve" (Jay, Fall, 1996).

In school, these males generally did not like reading and writing; some liked reading until they got burned out doing book reports. One had AP English for four years in high school but could not make up "for the failures which I had in writing before I had my [good] high school teacher"(Phillip, Fall, 1996). More males than females mentioned influential teachers such as the teacher who would daily spend time with each student, and "we would read to her a selected book she picked out for us" (Terry, Fall, 1996). Other

teachers regimented reading and writing to the point of boredom which discouraged students.

Tentative females described numerous pre-school experiences in great detail and were asked to write for their illiterate grandparents. They read more books than males did. Like their male counterparts, these young women may have originally liked to read, even performed well at it, but lost interest when teachers discouraged them in some way. Rachel, a case in point, tells about her sophomore English teacher, "who complained of my writing skills. She gave me bad grades because she thought I could write better. For the last three years of high school, I wrote just enough to get by" (Fall, 1996).

Portfolio writing required by Kentucky high schools was also discouraging to those who did not enjoy writing. Some reported liking writing until these requirements were forced on them. Required reading had similar reactions.

Although their autobiographies were excellent in the information they shared, these writers were not confident in their other work throughout the semester. Of the six males, fifty percent failed the course because they failed the departmental proficiency exam, sixteen percent got D's, and thirty-three percent received low C's. Of the females, thirty-three percent failed the proficiency exam, sixteen percent D's, and fifty percent received low C's.

Confident Students

Males and females in this category have many similarities. They had more to say about their pre-school literacy than the tentative ones. All were read to; many had grandparents or parents spend time with them sounding out words and making letters on paper. One male and one female wrote about memorizing the words in a book, then going

back to the book to match what they had memorized. Lisa relates one of her early memories of reading similar to many other students in this category:

> One of my fondest memories is spending time with my mamaw [grandmother]. I loved those nights because I knew it meant a story before bedtime. I'll never forget climbing up into her lap and rocking in the old brown and green rocking chair. She would always let me pick out the stories. (Fall 1996)

In contrast to tentative students, about sixty percent of parents of both males and females finished high school and about a third finished college. One mother had her masters degree in education. All grandparents had high school diplomas; two were college educated. Two parents who were dropouts went back for their GED. The main purposes of reading and writing for these families were communicating with other family members, keeping up with the news, gathering information, interacting with neighbors, and improving their spiritual lives.

One narrative was particularly powerful for models of literacy. Tom describes himself at about the age of four:

> One of my grandfather's favorite compositions is "The Creation" by Franz Joseph Haydn. It is an opera about the Bible's account of the creation of man. The words were originally written in German, but the English translation was printed alongside the German words on the inside of the album's dust cover. So together, we would sit in the floor, listen to the record in sections, read the German lyrics for that section, and then read the English translation. (Fall, 1996).

This young man went on to write his own music and to do exceptionally well in school.

In terms of their reading material, more females than males listed the books they have collected—one had 100 or more books, another had 200. Lindy relates, "When I was in first grade, the class held a reading contest of a month. I read a total of 62 books, 2049 pages, quite a lot for a six-year-old" (Fall, 1996). What was amazing is that while

working on this narrative, she went back to visit her first grade teacher who gave Lindy the chart where all of this was recorded twelve years ago!

For reading material, males read horror novels and articles about installing car stereos; females read romantic novelists like Danielle Steele and V. C. Andrews. Some parents bought books for their children; one parent ordered Highlights, a children's magazine for her child. Several went to the library frequently. Both groups watched and learned from television programs like Sesame Street and Electric Company.

The high school experiences of these young people were also similar. Both males and females wrote extensively in genres from poems to short stories to research papers. Fifty percent of the group wrote extensive portfolios all four years of school, three receiving the highest rating which the state of Kentucky gives on the state performance tests. (The other half went to school in West Virginia where portfolios were not required.) Two wrote for school newspapers and felt pride in knowing that their peers were reading and enjoying their stories. What surprised me is that none of these freshmen specifically mentioned the names of any influential teachers as had their tentative counterparts. Perhaps they forgot or perhaps they felt success was their own.

Both groups were vociferous about timed reading tests, long boring novels, book reports, and in-class writing. Jonathan aptly describes his experience:

> In high school, the teachers make you practice and become a better reader by having you read long, boring, drawn out novels that have little meaning . . . . If you can read the entire novel without falling asleep, pulling your hair our, or throwing it in the garbage, you have developed your reading skills that much more. (Fall, 1996)

One young woman loved writing in her journal because no teacher would correct

it; ironically, she did not see herself as a good writer and feared the judgment of her teacher on formal writing. She echoed the same fear of those from confident and unconfident categories.

These confident learners share the same purposes for reading and writing as the tentative students. On the home front, they and their families use writing for letters, recipes exchanges, grocery lists, crossword puzzles, permission slips for school trips, and so on. Reading included the Bible and other spiritual materials, newspapers, hunting and fishing magazines, catalogs, and insurance forms. Business uses of literacy included parents filling out forms related to their jobs, reading and writing sales reports, and writing down measurements for work. Jonathan, who worked as a floor manager for Wal-Mart, reported that "without these skills [of reading and writing], it is very hard to be the best employee you can be and hard to keep a job that you really need" (Fall, 1996).

Uses of literacy differ in the following ways: the females and their mothers usually use writing to sort out personal feelings by writing in journals or keeping track of the day's happenings. One mother wrote the history of her life to share with her family. One young woman was hoping to publish a book. No males mentioned keeping journals but one wrote about the coming together of his family once a week to read the Bible. His grandparents then wrote notes in tablets as they were reading.

Of these males and females, one-third received A's and two/thirds received B's at the end of the semester.

Gettin' Above Their Raisin's: Student Concerns

Despite these rich literacy histories, these students, especially the tentative ones,

are concerned with how they will manage college work. They don't want to appropriate a voice that will alienate them from their families, hence the reference to "getting above their raisings." In graduate school now, I am sympathetic to that dilemma since I wrestle with the issue of authentic voice in graduate school discourse. Nancy Sommers (1992), whose moving essay, "Between the Drafts" describes her family's and her own struggle with voice, connects to this conflict: "When they write about their lives . . . [students] write with confidence. As soon as they begin to turn their attention toward outside sources, they too lose confidence, defer to the voice of the academy, and write in the voice of Everystudent to an audience they think of as Everyteacher" (29). If they can "write about their lives," they have an easier time than if we ask them to write about something else.

Luna (1993), professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Education, speaks most specifically to this dilemma when she describes students "choosing (or feeling forced) to speak in a voice other than that which they have developed within their families and communities; [it] may feel to students like turning away from themselves and what they care about" (p. 129). Luna gets to the heart of the question when she asks "Can students develop and maintain their cultural voices and also learn the codes of power? Can teachers learn to hear and value stories different from their own? . . . . What will it take to tell a new story?" (p. 136)

Working with African Americans in her classroom, Denise Troutman (1997) asks a similar question to Luna's and mine: "Whose Voice is It Anyway?" She wonders whether students shouldn't learn to "discover and warm up to their own voices before they add on other voices" (p. 36). She believes that to write with authority, students must learn to trust their voices by "discovering, grasping control of, and retaining authentic voices," and

"become confident as writers and as members of a distinct speech community" (p. 36). This depends on their teachers' openness to varieties of literacies and to students' expression of their own cultures, an alternative which may enliven language (p. 38).

Teachers might also respond to questions of alienation by softening the dichotomies of insider/outsider language and looking at how the

> outsider's own language overlaps, conflicts with, shapes, and is shaped by the insider's language . . . Students and teachers begin to see their language as mutually shaping; they recognize their double [poly]-voicedness . . . Instead of being seen as outsiders, students assume a position of strength. (Soliday, 1994, p. 522)

If we listen to and learn from these autobiographies, we can encourage this position. Without this struggle between inside/outside language, students could be stuck in a narrow field of language.

Problems With Narratives

Postmodern thinkers question "the existence of a rational, coherent self and the ability of the self to have privileged insight into its own processes" (Faigley, 1992, p. 111). Based on Foucault's belief that the self is not fixed and alters throughout the story, this theory problematizes the author concept, the Romantic idea of individual self-expression. Writing narratives can perpetuate this individualism if student authors displace the experiences of those who aren't included in the story (Graham, 1991, p. 147).

Despite this problem, Faigley (1992) continues to see value in narratives: "Asking students to write narratives about the culture in which they participate is one way of allowing them to explore agency and to locate themselves within their culture" (p. 218). In fact, Lyotard (French postmodernist) believes that narratives can reveal a sense of self and, "in telling their own stories, marginalized groups can gain local legitimacy and can

oppose majority discourses" (p. 218). Schilb (1996) supports autobiographical writing if students recognize how mutable and provisional self-definition is, and discuss how their story relates to narratives of others different from their own (pp. 174-75). He goes on to state: "Contrary to popular (or academic) belief, autobiographical essays can be as artful, publicly minded, and intellectually rigorous, even serving as a prime vehicle of theory . . . . Emotions can have cognitive validity" (p. 172).

Another problem related to writing autobiographies is "the filter of time in recalling events" (Clery, 1991, p. 5). Students may invent answers when they don't remember or don't like what they remember. Open-ended questions help alleviate this problem.

Beach (1987), comparing autobiographies of seventh graders, college freshmen, and English teachers, considers the poor quality of freshmen narratives. He urges teachers to work with freshmen to improve the surface quality by encouraging them to return to scene of their literacy acquisition, say their junior high years, "to recapture their previous feelings about and perceptions of that past place or time" comparing those to their present perspective (p. 66). Pre-writing activities will help them connect the relevancy of what they are saying to their thesis, so that the autobiography will be more focused. Teachers must also take into account the developmental stages of students who at this point will not write sophisticated accounts of their lives (p. 67).

Graham (1991) proposes that all narratives do not have to be stuck in historical, chronological order. Exposing our students to a variety of forms may allow for a different sort of autobiography, one more in keeping with the postmodern world in which we live. Teachers should at least

> Be alive to the fact that they are dealing with a very complex and demanding genre, one that does not always wear its intentions on its sleeve and that can yet contain a wealth of riches . . . [and] one of the most powerful methods for reclaiming their [disenfranchised groups] collective voices and for redeeming a lost sense of historical consciousness. (pp. 155-6)

Another problem I had was students answering questions lockstep which I attribute to the structure of the prompts which I deal with below. With these objections in mind, I can use narratives to help my students situate themselves in the college, the community from which they come, and we can look at solutions to problems that emerge from our study.

Reflections On Teacher Research

Knowing more about teacher research now than I did when I first began this study, I would change several procedures. Although the prompt that I used is based on research, I would not hand out the list of questions to the students but encourage students to respond to them as writing prompts in their journals which we would share in class (and which I could read later). To the prompt, I would add questions about music, art, and mathematics, and other literacies which they bring to the classroom.

In terms of the coding I used, I would probably retain the confident/tentative categories, but drop the males/females category unless I wanted to do a more specific gender analysis than I have done in this study.

I have also become more aware of students as co-participants in the study. In the future, I would involve them more in the research, sharing results with them. I also want to watch that I treat my students as persons and not objects, a clear advantage of qualitative over quantitative research. I also believe with Paul Anderson that we need to

be aware of ethical concerns in our research. In the future I will spend more time with the consent form, explaining that students can decide at any time not to participate without fear of penalty. Thinking of our students, we should always be mindful that:

> The volunteers in our formal studies hand us the gift of their time and cooperation. The persons whose unpublished words we quote have shared their experiences, ideas, and feelings with us . . . . Let it be our goal to assure that both individually and as a discipline we treat these gifts—and their givers—justly, respectfully, and gratefully. (p. 83)

The main advantage for me of this research project is what my students have taught me. Cathy Fleisher's reflects my view of active teacher research: "I will continue to conduct research from my perspective as a classroom teacher because I am committed to improving my teaching practice and to benefiting my students' learning and because I understand teacher-research to be the most powerful means of enabling those commitments" (p. 120).

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Immeasurable gratitude goes to all of my students for their inspiring narratives; looking more closely, I have learned more than I thought possible.

APPENDIX A
READING AND WRITING AUTOBIOGRAPHY
HANDOUT

READING AND WRITING AUTOBIOGRAPHY
WRITING PROMPTS
Fall/Spring 1996-7

Examining your reading and writing history will enable you and me to see how reading and writing are defined, learned, and practiced. I think you will be amazed and surprised at your discoveries.

Below are listed some questions, separated into the two categories. You are to use these to reflect on in journal or rough draft entries; sometimes we will do these in class. Then on the designated day in your course outline, you will be expected to come to class with a rough draft of the total document to read to your group; the final draft will be due the following week.

While there is a tendency to write down answers one by one, I ask you to organize your essay by perhaps focusing on the answers to a few questions; as you reflect on the answers, a pattern may emerge which could be the crux of your essay. If you are unsure about how to organize it, ask people in your group; then let me look at your responses if you're still puzzled.

WRITING QUESTIONS

1. What education do your parents and grandparents have?
2. What sort of writing did/do they use? Think of recipes, grocery lists, notes to teachers, letters to the editor of paper, letters to relatives, absolutely any kind of writing.
3. Did/Does your church use writing? Think of bulletins, notices, newsletters, grants.
4. Did/Do you write letters to relatives who live away from here, friends at other colleges?
5. Did/Do you write notes in classes and pass them; do you write love notes to loved ones?
6. What kind of in-class writing did you do in element and high school? If you did portfolios in any subject, describe that experience in detail.
7. Have you ever had anything published?
8. Did you ever work on school newspaper or annual?
9. Who are the significant people who influenced your writing (either good or bad)?
10. Can you list failures and successes as a writer?
11. Why in general do people write?
12. Imagine a world where people didn't write.
13. Describe a good writer/good writing.

READING QUESTIONS

1. Were your parents/grandparents readers (signs, directions, lists, racing forms, recipes, newspapers, astrology signs, magazines)?
2. What is attitude toward reading in your house? (waste of time, good use of time)
3. Did your parents read to you? If so, what were your favorite books?
4. How did you learn to read? (Sesame Street. School, parents, others)
5. What are your attitudes toward reading? Do you like/dislike it? Are you good/average/bad at it? What are strengths/weaknesses as a reader?
6. If you could guess, how many books would you say you owned? Magazines? Newspapers?
7. How many books have you read in the last 12 months?
8. Why do you/other people read?
9. In elementary and secondary school, how much reading did you do?
10. What kind of books do you like to read? Your favorite authors?
11. What people played a significant role in your reading development?
12. Imagine a world without reading.
13. Describe a good reader.
14. How do you use reading in your daily life?

APPENDIX B
RESULTS OF CONTENT ANALYSIS CHART

RESULTS OF CONTENT ANALYSIS
STUDENT LITERACY NARRATIVES

DIFFERENCES

TENTATIVE	CONFIDENT
responded to general questions on prompt	answered more specific questions
one-third were read to	all were read to
about eighty percent of fathers, twenty percent of mothers dropped out of h.s.	sixty percent of both finished high school; thirty percent finished college; one had masters
disliked school writing	wrote extensively in all genres
mentioned influential teachers	did not mention influential teacher
read fewer books	read/collected many books
did not mention library	went to library frequently
did not mention h.s. newspaper	several wrote for h.s. newspapers
uncomfortable with writing	confident with writing
became discouraged w/ school	had success in high school

SIMILARITIES

1. All students agreed on the crucial need for literacy in this technological age.

2. Both watched television learning programs like Sesame Street, Mr. Rogers, etc.

3. The families of both confident and tentative students used literacy for
   - communicating with other family members and friends,
   - keeping up with the news,
   - assisting them at the workplace
   - gathering information,
   - improving their spiritual lives.

4. Both groups agreed on teaching techniques that discouraged students from learning:
   - required book reports/portfolios
   - getting behind in work
   - boring choices for reading
   - getting bad grades
   - timed reading tests
   - too much in-class and graded writing